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All previous protestations of friendship of the Sikh community ring hollow and it is becoming increasingly clear that Islamic fundamentalist elements, who control the Government in Pakistan, have decided to appropriate unto themselves Sikh gurdwaras in Pakistan and the properties attached to them.

The Archaeological Department of Pakistan had conducted a survey of the Sikh historical gurdwaras soon after the 1947 Partition. It had listed as many as 130 important historical gurdwaras. Detailed information about these gurdwaras was later incorporated in the book "Sikh Shrines in West Pakistan" by Khan Mohammed Waliullah Khan and published by the Department of Archaeology, Govt. of Pakistan in 1962. These shrines include 28 gurdwaras built in the sacred memory of Guru Nanak Devji - Gurdwara Janam Asthan, Nankana Sahib; Gurdwara Sachcha Sauda; Gurdwara Parija Sahib, Hassan Abdal; Gurdwara Chaki Sahib,

Eminabad; Gurdwara Darbar Sahib, Kartarpur; Gurdwara Bairi Sahib; Sialkot, etc. One gurdwara, Janam Asthan Guru Ram Das, Lahore, marks the memory of the fourth Guru, Sri Ram Das. Eight gurdwaras, including Gurdwara Budhu Ka Awa, Lahore; Samadh of Guru Arjan Dev; and Gurdwara Haft Madar, Sheikhpura are in the sacred memory of the fifth Guru, Sri Arjan Devji. There are twelve gurdwaras in the memory of the sixth Guru, Guru Hargobind ji.

Each of these gurdwaras has its own property in the form of agricultural land and buildings. Such land had been donated by the Sikh devotees from time to time for the maintenance and upkeep of these historical gurdwaras. Some of these gurdwaras thus have thousands of acres of land. The property of these gurdwaras is worth hundreds of crores of Rupees. This property went under the control of the Waqf Board after Partition and has since then been systematically misused and misappropriated. Except very few gurdwaras, where Sikh pilgrims from India are allowed to visit in the form of Jathas on religious/historical occasions, not a Rupee has been spent on the maintenance and upkeep of other gurdwaras by the Waqf Board. Sikh devotees, who have acquired foreign nationalities and could visit

some of the gurdwaras (beyond access to Indian Sikhs), have come back with horrifying accounts. These gurdwaras are not only in a bad state of disrepair but have been systematically desecrated by local residents who use them as shelter for domestic animals and as ground for sun drying dung cakes. Shops have been set up in gurdwara premises and the essential routine of prayers is not being followed. These grand sites marking significant events in Sikh history are today hut-like and decrepit buildings.

Knowledge of the sad state of gurdwaras in Pakistan has been common place among Sikhs worldwide. There has been an intense desire among them to gain access to all the gurdwaras in Pakistan so that they can be surveyed before repair work is undertaken and moves are initiated with the administration for eviction of encroachers and for restoration of alienated land. On its part, the Shiromani Gurdwara Prabandhak Committee (SGPC) has been demanding that the gurdwaras in Pakistan, which were part of its domain between 1929 and 1947 (when Partition took place) should be restored to it. The SGPC has made several appeals to the Pakistan Government in this regard. The intensity of the desire of Sikhs to accomplish

this is amply reflected in the fact that, in prayers said twice a day, every Sikh beseeches God to bless him with free access to the gurdwaras in Pakistan so that they can be maintained as well as the gurdwaras in India.

It is worth recalling that the Sikhs had to wage a prolonged struggle to recover control of gurdwaras from corrupt Mahants, who were using the resources Of gurdwaras for personal aggrandisement. The Mahants, had taken care to keep the British on their right side. The patience and persistence of Sikhs involved in the struggle to liberate the gurdwaras was rewarded as the SGPC was formed as an elected body to run the gurdwaras. In the wake of the Partition, the Waqf Board took over charge of the gurdwaras in Pakistan and the results are for all to see. The Waqf Board has been no better than the Mahants. The resultant pain in the hearts of Sikhs is so intense that it cannot be imagined.

Three centuries have passed since the 10th Guru, Guru Gobind Singh, ordained the Khalsa. In commemorating this event recently, the entire Sikh community paid tribute to the vision of the great Guru, resolved to abide by his ministerations and

undertook not to spare any effort for the preservation and advancement of Sikhism. Many world leaders, including heads of State and the governments of India, UK and Canada, have felicitated the Sikhs and made complimentary references to the honesty and integrity exhibited consistently by members of the Sikh community. At this great juncture, as all Sikhs celebrate and re-dedicate themselves to the ideals cherished by their Gurus, Pakistan has delivered a body blow to the entire Sikh Community. The Pakistan Gurdwara Prabandhak Committee (PGPC) was formed through a recent notification. Its autocratic chief, Lt. Gen. (Retd) Javed Nasir was quick to unveil his real colours as he prevented the SGPC from maintaining its traditional right to collection of offerings made by pilgrims on important religious occasions, when Jathas from India visit three gurdwaras in Pakistan.

If the Pakistan Government was sincere in its protestations of concern for the Sikh community and if it wanted to make a symbolic gesture on the occasion of the tercentenary of Khalsa, it need not have wasted its time to set up the PGPC. Without even giving up the stranglehold that it has maintained over the gurdwaras in Pakistan, it could have announced a phased programme for their

restoration and repair, and for the restoration of alienated lands

Instead, it proceeded to appoint puppets from amongst Pakistani Sikhs to the PGPC, so that it could project that the Sikh Community was being allowed to run its own affairs in Pakistan. It does not need any effort to understand that neither Gyan Singh of Baluchistan, nor Ram Singh of Peshawar, nor Satnam Singh of Sindh and their three other Sikh colleagues have religious credentials and that they are but instruments in the hands of Gen. Javed Nasir. One fails to understand as to why another three Muslims have been appointed on to the PGPC. Is there an intention to Islamise the Sikhs in the Islamic Republic of Pakistan, which is inexorably sliding towards obscurantism? Clearly, no discerning Sikh would regard the creation of the PGPC as a step in the right direction.

Gen. Nasir has already given away his real intentions. In an interview (April 23, 1999) to "Jung", the largest circulated Urdu daily in Pakistan, Gen. Nasir did not so much as outline any plan for the restoration of gurdwaras in Pakistan to their original glory but proceeded to suggest that the

creation of the PGPC would provide a fillip to the "separatist movement" in Punjab, which, in due course, would threaten the very integrity of the Indian nation. One wonders why an experienced General should believe the myth that there is a separatist movement in Punjab and why he should lay store by a non-existent phenomenon to achieve what might be regarded as a military objective. Clearly, he is not equipped in any way to handle the affairs of gurdwaras, as he remains burdened primarily by military preoccupations.

All previous protestations of friendship of the Sikh community ring hollow and it is becoming increasingly clear that Islamic fundamentalist elements, who control the Government in Pakistan, have decided to appropriate unto themselves Sikh gurdwaras in Pakistan and the properties attached to them, so that all traces of the Sikh faith are removed from the firmament in Pakistan. Sikhs have combated such challenges in the past and will do so now. Let the Government of Pakistan and its operatives not forget that the *raison d'être* of the Sikh religion was its ability to protect the meek from oppression by Muslim rulers. The Sikh Gurus made several sacrifices in the course of their such campaign. Two of them, the 5th Guru and the 9th

Guru, were martyred in the process and the four sons of the 10th Guru were brutally killed. Many other loyal adherents of the Gurus gave up their lives in the Struggle to liberate this land from the clutches of ruthless and avaricious Muslim rulers. The Sikhs maintain the spirit even today and will not hesitate to shed blood, if that should be necessary, to protect their religion and all elements of their heritage, no matter what the locale.